

Eyewitness account of Sri Lankan detention camps

Our correspondents
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The following is an eyewitness account of the conditions facing about 265,000 Tamil civilians confined to military-run detention centres in Sri Lanka. Most of the refugees fled over the past month from the so-called no-fire zone inside Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-held territory that had been repeatedly shelled by the army. Many were emaciated, injured or sick when they left on foot and have not received adequate attention. WSWS reporters managed to speak to detainees in the northern town of Vavuniya where a number of the camps are sited.

Vavuniya and its suburbs are like a military garrison. The Vanni command headquarters for the armed forces occupies a huge area about three kilometres from the town centre. Road blocks and checkpoints are everywhere. Foot patrols by armed soldiers are frequent, as well as passing jeeps and trucks filled with soldiers.

To get to Vavuniya, one has to travel from Colombo by train or bus to Madawachchie, 25 kilometres to the south. These days no trains go further. At Madawachchie, there are stringent security measures for anyone wanting to travel north. People have to stand in long queues at a security checkpoint to register. Personal details have to be provided, including the reason for visiting and an address in Vavuniya.

On the road from Madawachchie, armed guard posts have been set up at frequent intervals. Near Vavuniya, a major checkpoint has been established at Irrataiperiyakulam where visitors must go through the checking and registration process again. The same lengthy procedures operate on the return journey.

Hundreds of Tamils from across Sri Lanka are attempting to travel to Vavuniya, desperate for any news of relatives and friends. Any Tamil leaving the town is issued with a receipt that must be produced on return. Ethnic Sinhalese wanting to enter the town are subjected to intensive questioning about the reasons for their visit.

There are four major detention centres for Tamil civilians at Chettikulam, in an area known as Manik Farm, about 33 kilometres west of Vavuniya. Each camp houses about 40,000 people. A few people we spoke to had been allowed to visit Manik Farm and described them as overcrowded with minimal facilities.

In Vavuniya itself, refugees have been housed in 23 small detention centres established in public schools and other government buildings. Every camp is packed with between 1,000 and 3,000 people. We were able to visit two schools. Both centres were guarded by armed policemen and soldiers. Barbed wire fences have been set up around the camps. Few people are allowed inside. The media is completely barred.

At one school, we could only see the faces of people as we spoke to them across a high, razor-wire topped wall. As we spoke to one person, two children began crying, asking us to take them away from the camp. Inside, up to 40 people are crammed into each school room. Small tents have been erected in school grounds.

From what various people told us, conditions inside the camps are crowded and unhygienic. In some centres, detainees can bathe twice a week. In others, there is not even enough water to wash. There are not enough toilets in any of the camps and hundreds of people have to use one toilet. Infectious diseases, including diarrhea, viral fever and chickenpox, are becoming common.

We were told that hundreds of children had been wounded during the fighting over the no-fire zone. Some had still not been treated. Virtually every family we spoke to had lost at least one member. The trauma of being trapped for months in the war zone is now being compounded by the conditions in the camps. No one can leave. Relatives who visit can only provide a few essentials.

Several older people told us that every day the army seizes young men and women from the camps and takes them away. No one knows where. In some cases, masked informers are used to identify "LTTE suspects". The military claims that about 3,000 LTTE fighters fled with the civilian refugees.

In every sense, these centres are concentration camps. The armed police and soldiers who zealously guard them, are to not there to "protect" the refugees as the government cynically claims, but to prevent anyone from leaving and any information from filtering out.

We tried but were unable to visit Vavuniya general hospital. Armed guards are posted to prevent anyone from entering. Visitors have to nominate a particular patient and are thoroughly checked.

Those who had been inside told us that the hospital was overflowing with patients in beds, on the floors, in the corridors and temporarily erected tents.

Several detainees spoke to us about the conditions inside the camps.

A 37-year-old woman was being held at one school with her two children. “We were forced to flee to the army-controlled area due to the intolerable shelling and hunger. We were kept in a school before being brought here.

“[Before we left the no-fire zone], there was a huge blast while an aircraft was flying overhead. A lot of people were wounded or killed, including my husband. My husband was a teacher. Since his death, my children do not talk much. I ask myself why we were left alive. Since we left our home about three months ago we have not had a proper meal.”

She explained that she was afraid the army would drag her way like other young women.

A man in his sixties condemned the government’s claim that the military had been conducting a humanitarian mission to “liberate” Tamil civilians. “No one in the world should have to experience this tragedy,” he said.

He explained that while he and his family were fleeing with others, his wife had been killed in an air strike. His sister and several others died on the way. “I am living to expose these atrocities when I get an opportunity. The security forces think that each and every Tamil is an LTTE member and an enemy,” he said angrily.

Another person explained: “We are herded here like animals and are compelled eat whatever we are provided. We have lost everything. But still we can work. They should allow us to leave and settle in our own places.”

A father was caring for his injured 16-year-old son. His wife and many others had been killed during an army artillery barrage. He had wrapped his wife’s body in a mat and buried her. When he got his injured son to a hospital, the boy’s limbs were motionless. The man began to sob as he explained that his two daughters had been taken away by the army.

Facing a growing international outcry, the Sri Lankan human rights ministry announced that anyone over 60 could leave the detention centres and stay with relatives. However, applications have to be made by a relative through administrative officers and then approved by the security forces commander in Vavuniya.

One person explained that a sick 72-year-old man had recently died before the process was completed. The dead person’s wife and children were in the camp but were not allowed to attend his funeral.

A woman from Colombo, who was visiting relatives, told us that her mother and brother had been separated while they were fleeing and were now being held at different Manik Farm camps. She had tried to get her mother released but without success. We heard many other many stories of families being split up.

A retired public servant told us he had managed to leave Kilinochchi for Vavuniya for medical treatment before fighting intensified in that area. His daughter’s family had been caught in the war and was now being held at a Manik Farm camp. It took five days before he was allowed to visit her.

He spoke thoughtfully about the origins of the war. In particular, he referred to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which betrayed the principles of socialism and entered the bourgeois government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. In the 1970s, LSSP ministers were directly responsible for drawing up the country’s communal constitution and other anti-Tamil discriminatory measures that led to the war.

“The government thinks it can sort out the problem of Tamils by defeating LTTE,” he said. “But as long as the present constitution and the communal character of its rule remains, the discrimination will remain.

“We are paying for the biggest mistake made by the Sri Lankan left—the LSSP. Once it fought for equal rights for everyone. But it entered into a coalition with the capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party government. Now almost all the left parties have embraced communalism. I wish for the unity of the Tamil and Sinhala masses that existed during 1950s.”



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